

NO ONE TOLD ME ABOUT THE DARK SIDE: PITFALLS FOR FACULTY TEACHING ONLINE

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory paper reports a study investigating the implications of online teaching for faculty at four-year institutions. A survey of faculty at three different Colleges of Business in North Carolina reveals significant professional implications for those teaching online courses. Three primary areas of investigation included: 1) Preparation time required to develop an online course, 2) Quantity of time devoted to actually delivering the course online, 3) Student evaluations of faculty teaching online. The authors find that there may be strong disincentives for teaching online courses. We conclude with a discussion of these findings and how they may be useful in effectively addressing the growing challenges facing faculty and administrators as more and more courses move online.

INTRODUCTION

A recent survey (2015) by the Babson Survey Research Group found that well over 6 million students reported taking one or more online course, a nearly 4 percent increase from the previous year. Thirty-two percent of higher education students now take at least one course online. Nearly three-quarters of academic leaders rating the learning outcomes in online education as the same or superior to those in face-to-face. The proportion of primary academic leaders that suggest that online learning is critical to their long-term strategy is at a new high of 69.1 percent. (onlinelearningconsortium.org/2015Survey). Distance delivery of curriculum is now becoming a standard medium for supplementing or replacing traditional classroom teaching (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Dolezalek, 2003; Drago, Peltier & Sorensen, 2002). For many institutions, the increased demand by students for online courses and improvements in Web-based technology have made this an economical and useful way to increase student enrollment. The increasing availability of distance education reveals the growing importance of this method of instruction.

US News and World Report now annually ranks online programs. What does a top-ranked online program look like? In it's recent rankings, US News ranked the Ohio State University – Columbus as the best online program in the United States. A combination of synchronous and asynchronous delivery methods is used, creating a hybrid environment for student learning. Synchronous online classes occur on set schedules and time frames. Students and instructors are online at the same time in synchronous classes since lectures, discussions, and presentations take place at specific hours. Asynchronous classes let students complete their work on their own time, with some structure and due dates. Hybrid courses mix synchronous and asynchronous and are become more popular. A unique aspect of OSU's online programs is that all of the online classes

are recorded and archived so students can access lecture material at their convenience. US News suggested two important factors for the quality of a program were faculty access and interaction and technology delivery systems and support. Some of the more popular Learning Management Systems are Blackboard, Canvas, Moodle, Schoology and Brightspace.

As Ohio State University and many other schools have found, distance learning has become increasingly popular among non-traditional adult students. The internet and electronic content delivery technologies has allowed online education to proliferate in use. The Sloan Foundation's 2009 report, *Learning on Demand: Online Education in the United States 2009* found that the online course registration at colleges and universities has continued to grow much faster than traditional residential or campus enrollments. Additionally, just shy of 80% of the young adults say that if they chose to go back to school, they would choose to do it online (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Ambient Insight reports that distance education has gradually become a more popular option in the hectic lives of adult learners, with over 1.5 million individuals enrolled across the U.S. The report also predicts that the number of students taking classes online should triple by 2018 (Classes and Careers 2010). Furthermore, when faced with surging enrollment, limited spaces, funding cut, and depressed economies, the higher education industry often try to expand online course and program offerings and attract student to enroll in online courses. As an increasing number of working adults pursue further education by choosing online education, especially online business education (Linardopoulos 2010), it becomes ever more important for researchers and practitioners to study online business education.

Faculty Implications

Given this tremendous interest and growth in online enrollments, faculty are being asked to develop quality online courses, and to teach these courses as well. The switch from traditional instruction to online may have a variety of implications and concerns for faculty. This study is driven by a simple question. Are there negative professional consequences for faculty who teach online? We now look at three important areas of concern: preparation time required to develop an online course, quantity of time devoted to delivering the course online and student evaluations of faculty teaching online.

Thormann and Zimmerman (2012) found that the design of the course and its implementation are two major categories of differences between teaching courses online and face-to-face. Time commitment has been identified as a major concern of faculty considering teaching online courses (Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006), as well as skills necessary to use technology tools and/or learning management systems (De Gagne & Walters, 2009). Determining and applying quality and comfortable teaching strategies for online curricula delivery often requires new skill sets (Brinthaupt, Fisher, Gardner, Raffo, & Woodward, 2011). These skill sets must be developed and this takes time and resources. The intensity of online work was identified as one of the major themes expressed by faculty in a qualitative study by De Gagne and Walters (2009). Faculty believed they spent more time on planning, designing, delivering and evaluating online instruction, and, also, indicated that their workload increased. Boettcher (2006) reported that faculty described

working up to 80-hour weeks while moving a traditional class to an online course. Generally, faculty are not compensated for this time investment.

The time it takes to actually teach an online course has not been well studied. Most of the current research has focused more on course design and time devoted to course development. Some studies have begun to look at instructor presence, communication and availability (Andersen and Avery, 2008; Preisman, 2014). There is certainly a concern among faculty that the time required to teach an online course is greater than the traditional classroom (Christianson, 2002; Van de Vord & Pogue, 2012). In their research, Van de Vord and Pogue (2012) suggest that online courses require more instructor time to administer than face to face courses. Sheridan (2006) proposed that online faculty spend more hours than traditional faculty in preparing and administering online courses.

Lazurus (2003) found that whereas a traditional course requires office hour availability several times a week, online course require daily availability. Moreover, faculty reported up to 4 to 5 times more email communication with students in an online course versus traditional face to face. There is an extensive time commitment required for reading and responding to text-based discussions, emails and the written assignments typical of an online course. Gallien and Oomen-Early (2008) suggest that the time necessary for online classroom administration is clearly greater than the face-to-face.

A last area of concern for faculty is student evaluations of faculty in online courses. Herbert (2006) examined student online course retention and course satisfaction and found that while successful completers are more satisfied with all aspects of the online courses; neither completers nor non-completers rank their overall experience exceptionally high. Some studies on the differences in student perceptions about online and face-to-face education indicate that online learners are as satisfied, or more satisfied. Boghikian-Whitby and Mortagy (2010) found that online students are more satisfied with the course activities than face-to-face students. Cao and Sakchutchawan (2011) found that, in terms of course evaluation numerical satisfaction results, online courses examined appear to receive somewhat lower rating by its students than traditional face-to-face courses.

Similarly, Young and Duncan (2014) looked at 11 pairs of online and traditional face-to-face courses of the same content. They found that on-campus courses were rated significantly higher than online courses in specific categories of evaluation as well as in overall satisfaction. Although many faculty question their validity, substantial research has supported the use of student ratings to measure teaching quality (Marsh, 2007), and student ratings of instruction are widely used in many colleges and universities as a primary means of measuring teaching effectiveness (Dresel & Rindermann, 2011; Galbraith, et. al. 2012). It is certainly particularly likely that online courses will use traditional numerical evaluation of faculty.

Survey of Faculty

In order to determine faculty experiences with online courses, a brief survey of 71 instructors from colleges of business in three universities (all in North Carolina) served as the means of data collection. Each participant was purposely selected based on their experience and

willingness to participate in the study (Creswell, 2013). Also, each participant met the criteria of having developed and taught an online course that they had previously taught in a face-to-face classroom. The email survey asked each instructor to respond to 4 primary questions regarding their experiences and perceptions of developing and teaching online. Each instructor was also asked to provide written additional anecdotal comments regarding their online teaching experience. Each course was fully delivered online (no hybrid or blended course). The survey was kept very brief to maximize faculty responses. Sixty-eight (68) faculty responded with sixty-four (64) useable responses received (94% response rate). Respondents received several reminders soliciting their participation.

Questions used in the survey were developed through interviews and email survey of a sample of faculty at the researcher's home institution. Following Fowler's survey development criteria, faculty were asked a series of open-ended questions and responses were compiled (Fowler, 1993). The questions were driven by the review of the literature as described above. Faculty responses were then reviewed by the researchers looking for consistencies in responses. We sought to determine a set of basic concerns reliably consistent across faculty teaching online courses. We found three primary areas of concern that faculty expressed. We returned to the faculty that were interviewed and asked them to verify and validate our summation of the responses into three categories. We received strong consistent support for our conclusions, adding validity to the three areas chosen. Consistent with Foster (Foster, 1993) and others, we did not include the pilot study faculty in our final survey to avoid possible "sampling with replacement" bias (Banerjee and Chaudhury, 2010).

The three questions below were developed based on the three categories of concern we found in our initial sample survey. We asked each faculty member in the full survey to respond to each of the following questions:

- 1) *Does it take more time to prepare your online course than your traditional, face to face course?*
 - a. *Much more (5)*
 - b. *More (4)*
 - c. *About the same (3)*
 - d. *Less (2)*
 - e. *Much less (1)*

- 2) *Does it take more time to administer/teach your online course than your traditional, face to face course?*
 - a. *Much more (5)*
 - b. *More (4)*
 - c. *About the same (3)*
 - d. *Less (2)*
 - e. *Much less (1)*

- 3) *Are you finding your student evaluations to be higher, or lower in the online course when compared to the same course taught face to face?*
- a. *Much lower (5)*
 - b. *Lower (4)*
 - c. *About the same (3)*
 - d. *Higher (2)*
 - e. *Much Higher (1)*

We also asked one additional question that we thought would be interesting. During our initial discussions with faculty in our pilot survey, we heard a variety of comments regarding the transition from teaching traditional courses to teaching online. A generally consistent theme was revealed in our pilot study data. Although we did not specifically ask faculty about this, faculty expressed the feeling that their new online course was an “additional prep”. By this they meant that teaching an online section of the same course that they were also teaching face-to-face, should be considered as an additional prep by administration. We could not find any studies that had directly addressed this concern. Therefore, we also asked the following question:

- 4) *Do you consider your online course to be an additional course prep? (Example: If you teach Management Principles traditional, Management Principles online and Strategic Management, is that three (3) preps. Yes/no?*

Findings

We compiled the responses from 64 faculty and found the following. Fifty-five out of sixty-four (86%) of our respondents indicated that it took *much* more time to develop their online course. Moreover, when combining the “much more” and “more” responses to question one, we found that sixty of the responding faculty (93%) said that their online course took more time to prepare than a traditional face-to-face course. The combination of two Likert scale items has support in the literature, particularly if the combined item simply represents total agreement with a question and is not going to be used in further statistical analysis (Andrich, 1978). Forty-one out of sixty-four (64%) faculty indicated that it took much more time to teach their online courses. Fifty-two of sixty-four faculty (81%) indicated that it took either much more, or more time to teach their online course. Lastly, forty-four out of sixty-four faculty (69%) indicated that their online course had either much lower, or lower student evaluations of them than their face-to-face course produced. See Table 1 below for the means of the item responses for questions one through three.

	<u>N</u>	<u>Mean*</u>
Question 1 - Course Development Time	64	4.79
Question 2 - Course Teaching Time	64	4.47
Question 3 – Course Evaluations	64	4.31

* “Mean” of the 5-point Likert scale

Question four was a simple yes or no question that we hoped might verify some of the anecdotal evidence we had been receiving from a variety of faculty. Faculty are very mindful of the number of courses they have to prepare for each semester, as more preps means more time devoted to teaching and less time for other faculty responsibilities like advising, committee work and certainly research. Of our sixty-four faculty respondents, fifty-nine (92%) felt that the online course was a separate and unique prep when compared to the same course taught face-to-face (note: we did not ask faculty if they were teaching both courses at the current time or whether they ever had taught both course at the same time).

DISCUSSION

We sense a growing concern among faculty regarding what the growth in online delivery of courses meant for them professionally. The literature certainly supports this conclusion. The findings described above only reemphasized more broadly to us that faculty are finding that teaching online is changing their work environment quite dramatically.

In their survey responses, faculty painted a picture of a new and changing work environment that was affecting their professional lives. Some faculty described an “administration running fast into online course growth” without thinking through the implications for faculty. Several faculty indicated that they were concerned with their ability to offer the same quality course online as they delivered in their face to face course. A few faculty indicated that when it came to making decisions about whether to offer a course online, or discussions regarding the ability to offer the same quality online, they were not involved in the process. They were often simply asked if they could or would develop their course for online delivery.

A somewhat consistent area of concern were faculty perceptions of what students thought an online course should be. Often, they expressed that students “think online means easy.” One faculty member said his online students thought online means “I do what I want when I want”. One faculty member said that students would complain about requirements in her online section and when she expressed that they were the same requirements found in her face to face course, the students would express that “online courses should be different”.

Many respondents said that communication was their biggest problem. Although some faculty said they only correspond with students during office hours (“I only read and respond to emails during my office hours”), many faculty felt the burden of always needing to be available. They revealed that many students believe that faculty should always be available and faculty blamed this, again, on the notion that this course should be available to me whenever I want, and that includes the faculty member’s presence. Faculty who expressed that they tried to meet the communication expectations of their online students described being “exhausted” by the communication needs of the course.

It should be noted that it appears from the data that much of what we have just describe becomes evident in student evaluations of faculty. With student perceptions of what an online course should be and faculty requirements often being quite in opposition, student expression for this opposition may be evaluations of faculty. A majority of our faculty found their online evaluations to be lower than their face to face evaluation of the same course. One faculty member

expressed that sometimes “students are simply dissatisfied with the whole online structure at my institution and the only outlet for their frustration is my evaluation.”

We were surprised by some of the comments from faculty regarding being asked about their online course being an additional prep. We had several faculty say they were glad someone asked them this question as they had been complaining about this for some time. Many faculty complained that their chairs simply were unwilling to look at their online courses as a separate prep. One faculty member said that when their review time came around they brought up both the additional prep issue and the time devoted to my online course, and its effect on time available for other responsibilities, including research. They were told by their chair that administration only seemed to care about new online growth opportunities for enrollment and retention. Faculty work life and work load were being “overlook”.

CONCLUSION

Reviewing the data from the responses we got along with the written comments made us feel a bit like we had stirred up a hornet’s nest. Faculty were very passionate about their concerns associated with teaching online. They certainly expressed a lack of being heard regarding these concerns.

It appears to us that teaching online has many implications for faculty work life. It also appears that administration must address the “dark side” of teaching a greater number of online courses. They ignore this at their peril. As we addressed earlier, the literature suggests that online course offerings will continue to grow. Faculty will continue to be called on to develop and teach these courses. The changing work life of faculty must be considered as institutions rapidly pursue more online course offerings.

Administration must begin to address these concerns. Faculty need greater support in course development. A recent study of distance learning called for better infrastructure, a focus on faculty ownership of online delivery and greater support from institution administration (Orr, et. al., 2009). This study concluded by stating that “an institution’s recognition of faculty and promotion is an important motivational factor for sustaining effectiveness in the online learning environment”. We concur that as institutions rapidly pursue the advantages online courses offer, they not neglect the delivery agent. We also believe that faculty must take a leading role in discussing with administration what the experience of teaching online is revealing to them.

Lastly, we recognize that this study has several limitations. The study is certainly exploratory in nature. It is limited in both sample size and scope, and therefore, we would not conclude that it is broadly generalizable. The methodology is quite simple. However, the findings are strong enough to conclude that further investigation is certainly called for. Since the study addresses such an important issue regarding the quality of work life for faculty, a broader and more sophisticated study is necessary. Such a study would be potentially very valuable information for administration as the endeavor to integrate more online learning into their overall course offerings.

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